

Trump's Withdrawal from 66 International Organisations: A Challenge to Global Governance

By Rhoda Wilson | January 19, 2026

Last week, President **Donald Trump signed a memorandum** to withdraw the United States from 66 international organisations, including the **UNFCCC**, the UN's foundational climate change treaty. This move represents a **strategic break** from a model of global governance that increasingly perpetuates problems rather than resolving them.

A Conceptual and Strategic Shift

While media coverage often frames this move as "reckless isolationism" or "short-term budget cutting," such framing misses the actual intent. The decision is a **deliberate strategic break** from institutions that rely on the continuous expansion of mandates, budgets, and crises to justify their own existence.

The larger gain here is **conceptual**: the restoration of the idea that **institutions should exist to solve problems**, not to manage them indefinitely.

What the United States Is Saving

The financial implications of this decision are significant, though the money primarily serves to reveal the administration's intent:

- **Identifiable Spending:** A conservative estimate shows the U.S. was spending at least **\$90 million per year** on a subset of these organisations.
- **The "\$90 Million Floor":** This figure is a lower bound based on clearly identifiable FY2023 obligations for a handful of large recipients. It excludes dozens of smaller agencies and indirect funding.
- **Major Recipients:** The bulk of identifiable spending went to four entities: the **United Nations Population Fund**, the **UNFCCC**, **UN Women**, and **UN-Habitat**.

The Institutional Pathology of Selected Bodies

The organisations were not chosen randomly; they share common traits that the administration seeks to challenge:

- **Process vs. Resolution:** Climate-related bodies like the UNFCCC support an "administrative machinery" of conferences and reporting frameworks that expand annually regardless of measurable outcomes.
- **Permanent Advocacy:** Bodies created for technical problems have evolved into **permanent advocacy platforms** that rarely declare success because doing so would undermine their relevance and funding.
- **Weak Performance, Strong Authority:** These institutions often reward the identification of expanding risks rather than measurable improvement, resulting in weak performance metrics but "strong moral authority".

Reasserting Sovereignty and Forcing Reckoning

By stepping away, the United States is reasserting **sovereignty over policy priorities** rather than outsourcing them to consensus-bound bodies. This decision sends a powerful **strategic signal**:

- **Breaking the Assumption of Inevitability:** It demonstrates that withdrawal is possible, challenging the idea that once a country joins a global institution, exit is unthinkable.

- **Influence vs. Subsidy:** The administration argues that influence exercised only by writing "ever-larger checks" to stagnant institutions is not influence, but a **subsidy**.
- **Potential for Reform:** Stepping away disrupts the current equilibrium. If these institutions reform and demonstrate real-world effectiveness, re-engagement remains possible.

Conclusion Ultimately, this decision confronts a global system that depends on the **continuous escalation of crisis narratives**. The restoration of the idea that **institutions are tools, not moral authorities**, is the most significant change resulting from this memorandum.

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